



## John La Montagne dies

**Leader in vaccine development at NIAID was 61 | [By Anne Harding](#)**

John R. La Montagne, who helped direct infectious disease research and vaccine development at the [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases](#) (NIAID) for nearly 30 years, died suddenly of a pulmonary embolism in Mexico City on November 2. He was 61.

La Montagne was a gifted leader and prescient thinker concerned with emerging infectious disease and global public health long before either became "fashionable," NIAID Director Anthony Fauci told *The Scientist*. Fauci chose La Montagne as his deputy in 1998, a post he held at the time of his death.

Trained as a microbiologist, La Montagne helped steer the US public health apparatus through some of its most turbulent times, orchestrating the development and licensing of a safer pertussis vaccine, leading NIAID's response to the emerging AIDS crisis, and [organizing a research response to severe acute respiratory syndrome](#) within months of the first outbreak. He played key roles in developing government strategies to address infectious disease, biodefense, and bioterrorism.

La Montagne was also a leader at the global level, helping to form the [Multilateral Initiative on Malaria](#), chairing the World Health Organization (WHO) Task Force on Strategic Planning for the [Children's Vaccine Initiative](#) and advising WHO on immunization and vaccines.

"His quest was really a rather selfless quest for making the world a little

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bit better in terms of getting the vaccines as best as possible to the people out there who needed them," Lone Simonsen, an epidemiologist and influenza specialist at the NIAID's Office of Global Affairs whom La Montagne brought on board in 2000, told *The Scientist*. "It really was a very big passion of his, I think."

La Montagne came to NIAID as the institute's first influenza program officer in 1976, after a postdoctoral fellowship at [Julius Youngner's](#) lab at the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied influenza, interferon, and Newcastle disease virus. "His career at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases really prospered from the moment he set foot in there because he had talents that very few people have and a feeling for this kind of work that was so useful to everybody," Youngner told *The Scientist*.

In 1983, La Montagne became program officer for the viral vaccines program, and was named influenza and viral respiratory diseases program officer the following year. When NIAID established its first AIDS program in 1986, La Montagne was chosen to head it. "It was the worst time he ever had because he was being whipsawed by all the forces that were then operating in the AIDS scene," Youngner recalled. "But he managed to keep things on an even keel."

La Montagne was named director of NIAID's Microbiology and Infectious Disease Program in 1987, which became a full-fledged division the following year. He held the position until becoming deputy director of the NIAID.

Colleagues remembered his skill and tact in fostering and leading complex collaborative projects. When reports of fevers in children given whole cell pertussis vaccine began to raise parental concerns, he worked with the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, and industry to organize international clinical trials of acellular pertussis vaccines that led to licensing of new products. "It really was a masterful set of events that led to the head-to-head comparison of 13 vaccines," [Regina Rabinovich](#), who worked with La Montagne for 11 years and is now director of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Infectious Diseases Program, told *The Scientist*.

La Montagne was at the heart of NIAID at a time of tremendous growth for the institute. Rabinovich, who joined NIAID as a fellow in 1988, said La Montagne saw the institute's responsibility as supporting public health as well as research and development, and maintaining a broad research portfolio in order to be prepared for the future.

Others of La Montagne's accomplishments include reinvigoration of tuberculosis research in response to the early 1990s rise in multidrug resistant diseases, forming a sexually transmitted disease branch, and guiding development of vaccines for rotavirus, influenza, and pneumococcus.

"He's been involved in the full spectrum of infectious disease issues, domestically and globally, and made very important contributions in a number of them," James M. Hughes, director of the National Center for Infectious Diseases at the CDC, told *The Scientist*. "His style was more to work calmly behind the scenes to make things happen, rather than to be prominent in the limelight, but that sort of fits with his personality."

The day after his death, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published an [editorial](#) by La Montagne and Fauci on intradermal flu vaccination as a means for stretching the supply.

"John was very good about responding to not just the cause of the moment but to really see what are the important things," George Curlin, deputy director of the Division of Microbiology and Infectious Disease at NIAID, told *The Scientist*. "Most headlines fade away, but some headlines are there for really important reasons, and he was able to program around those very effectively."

Montagne is survived by his wife, two brothers, and a sister.

#### **Links for this article**

National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases

<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/default.htm>

J.R. La Montagne et al, "Severe acute respiratory syndrome: developing a research response," *J Infect Dis*, 189:634-41, February 15, 2004.

[\[PubMed Abstract\]](#)

Multilateral Initiative on Malaria

<http://www.mim.su.se/english/index.asp>

Institute of Medicine, *The Children's Vaccine Initiative: Achieving the Vision*, National Academies Press, 1993.

<http://books.nap.edu/openbook/0309049407/html/>

Julius Youngner

[http://www.mgb.pitt.edu/personnel/Youngner\\_Julius.htm](http://www.mgb.pitt.edu/personnel/Youngner_Julius.htm)

Regina Rabinovich

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/AboutUs/LeadershipStaff/BioGHRabinovich.htm>

J.R. La Montagne, A.S. Fauci, "Intradermal influenza vaccination—can less be more?" *N Engl J Med*, November 3, 2004.

<http://content.nejm.org/cgi/reprint/NEJMe048314v1.pdf>

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